

‘Civic Virtue’ – Further Contemplations

Summary of Introduction given on 7th March 2010

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Civic Virtue (The Installation)

The centre of the space is occupied by three vitrines that each holds a (neo)classic object. The vitrine in the middle, which holds the position of being in the approximate centre of the space, holds an original Roman marble head from the 2nd century AD.

The Roman head – an Aphrodite Euploia – forms the ideal which the objects to each side aspire to be through imitation; the 19th century plaster bust does so by being a plaster copy of the Roman original, while the clock on its right does so as a matter of style – the style of Empire.



Roman Aphrodite Euploia - 150 AD and Republican - 19th Century Copy



Republican - 19th Century Copy



Empire Style Clock - 19th Century

The ‘Republican’¹ sits to the left – a conspicuous representation of Rome’s Republican era and its short-lived trend of naturalism, while the clock sits to the right of the head. The clock is in the Empire style – a style determined by the rise of the French Empire as Napoleon is crowned the new monarch of France in the aftermath of the French Revolution. The bust and the clock form a symmetrical relationship Rome’s zero-point – before and after the fall of the Republic.

While it is time itself that has decapitated the aphrodite, she none-the-less is victim of a beheading though it may be organic in nature. It is what places her at the centre of a formal joke. This irony relies on a subliminal recognition of the effect of the French Revolution as a subliminal association with the guillotine. Still, is it not strange how antiquity relies on severed heads for its representation?

¹ The ‘Republican’ is a plaster copy of the original marble bust from the 1st century BC. Plaster copies were produced on order for educational purposes throughout the 19th century and have since acquired independent value.



Roman Aphrodite Euploia - 150 AD

There is nothing that so fully encompasses the idea of objectification as an ancient aphrodite, but it is a perverse reversal of the idea; it is the gaze of the head that is on display – equally alive without her body, as with her body as is a statue's wont.



Empire Style Clock - 19th Century



Empire Style Clock - 19th Century



Empire Style Clock - 19th Century

The clock, on the other hand, holds the gilded figure of a woman. Leaning on a table, its legs in the figure of a sphinx, she is a muse who has successfully internalized the ideals of her newly established Empire. Despite the overlaid signification of herself as object, the demure pose of this decorative item is uncanny in its survival and outright mobility.²

² The question of mobility is one that relies on understanding the intrinsic capability of the sign. Having the object as its host, to move between situations, it is a mobility that needs to be valued as an object to ensure its physical survival despite shifting aesthetic and political trends.

Stedenmaagd



Diagram 1

The woman of the Empire Style clock sits facing a modern-day drawing of the allegorical maiden of the city: the Stedenmaagd. Whilst the Empire clock woman holds the posture of domestic docility, she stands in direct opposition to a modern-day rendition of Marianne³ – the personification of liberty. The energy of any revolt lies precisely in the severity of contradictions – the image is an amalgam of the city's allegorical maiden of virtue and of Marianne's spirit of rebellion. In so doing, it produces an approximate inversion of neoclassic designs which were meant to indicate a desire freedom and liberty as a system of rationality, but its reality reads more as a smug aesthetics of control.

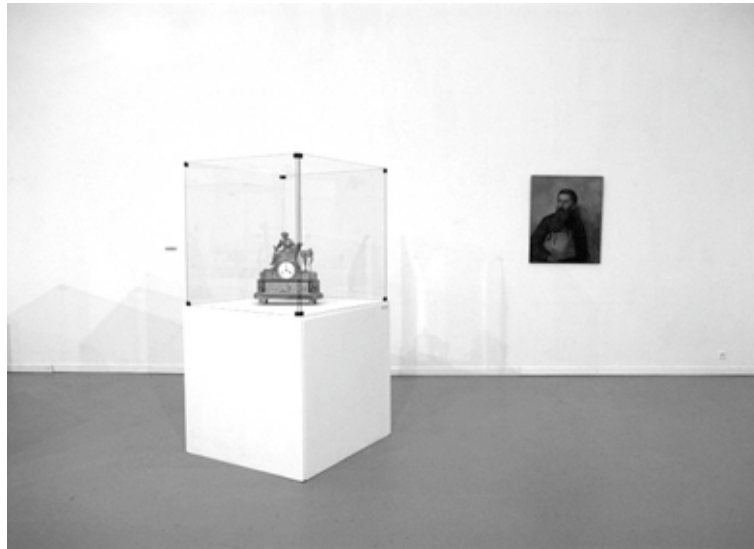
³ Marianne is mainly associated with the French Revolution and is a figurehead for the will of common people. Her image still figures prominently in much symbology that defines the French Republic.



Diagram 2

The Phrygian cap is one of many transgressive icons which are re-introduced in their original context of allegory. It is a sign that has always held a violent contradiction within itself – its history deeply complicit with the Roman habit of enslavement as it refers to a ceremonial cap whose purpose is to signify a freed slave.

The sign found itself to be in the fashion of the French Revolution as its supporters identifies with the celebration of their own collective liberation – free to take on their natural connotation of bondage in its mental conditioning, just as much as in bodily restrictions. When the Phrygian cap was forced onto the head of Louis XVI it was considered a benevolent sign of his liberation from the misconstrued ideology of monarchy – supposedly overlooking the humiliation such an act was intended to showcase.



Empire Style Clock - 19th Century and Portrait of C.M. Garms

The Portrait of C.M. Garms by Lizzy Ansingh hangs on the opposite wall to the Stedenmaagd. It holds the same logic of the inward gaze as it is one artist as painted by another. It is practically a portrait of a gaze, a gaze that has been turned inward as it is the image of one artist as realized by another.

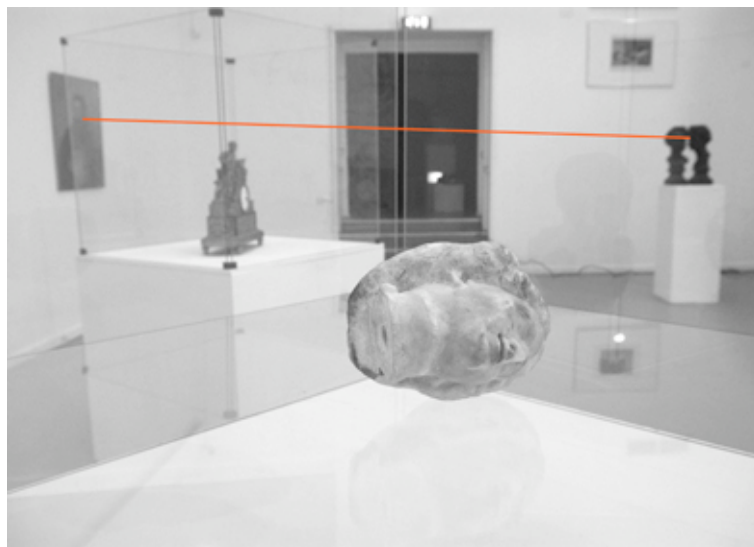


Diagram 3

It is the bronze heads of Beaver Atlantis which redirects attention towards the Portrait of C.M. Garms as a way of negotiating the relationship between those personalities of the opposing walls. But it is functions to draw attention to the fact that the Stadenmaagd is conspicuously devoid of a gaze herself. It is as if the natural outcome of the sign claiming its sovereignty had necessarily negated the gaze. Perhaps this has something to do with the internal life of the object – it affirms itself by negating a false imitation of a subject.



Stedenmaagd

Beaver Atlantis



Diagram 4

The complicity of the bronze sculptures lies within a sarcastic formality; one statue has abandoned his own plinth to join his double in a new and awkward proximity; as one of the statues is a plaster the copy of the bronze original. The statue which occupies its own plinth is left to coldly ignore the displaced interest of the imitation / original – something like an alternative version of Narcissus whose gaze is ignored by his own reflection.



Beaver Atlantis

The sculpture is a portrait by J. B. Carpeaux of the painter J.L. Gérôme; the former being a renowned 19th century French painter and the latter being a sculptor of similar stature. The sculpture itself is another embodiment of one artist gazing at the other in the form of portraiture. The object itself however is the portrait of a gaze because this is the defining characteristic of the artist. J.L. Gérôme, the object of this aesthetic pun, had experienced a fit of neoclassical resurgence – temporarily veering from his popular romantic and oriental paintings. To these ends, he took on both the subject matters of the classical age, and the severity of the neoclassical style – managing in the process to make himself slightly unpopular for such aesthetic reforms. Amongst other things, the assassination of Julius Caesar found its way on his canvas.



Beaver Atlantis

Above the portrait of J.L. Gérôme hang prints by Henriette Ronner of kittens – its formal aspect lying in symmetry and the idea of a geometrical precision. It is a subjective estimation of all the lost order of the ancient world.

The kittens are placed on opposite sides of the wall of the Beaver, which needless to say, opens a whole new dimension of internal symbology. It produces the iconography of a classical temple, wherein the beaver becomes the main figure of its supporting pediment.



Beaver Atlantis

The beaver is infamous for its building of dams and lodges; as an animal it is the symbol of nature's imitation of human society and the human drive for the creation of self-enclosed structures. It implies not only the physical structures, but also the social mechanism that such a collective drive entails. (I mean really, why can't they just behave like proper animals?)



Beaver Atlantis

The beaver also forms the beginning of a set of constructions that is made of directional perspectives.⁴

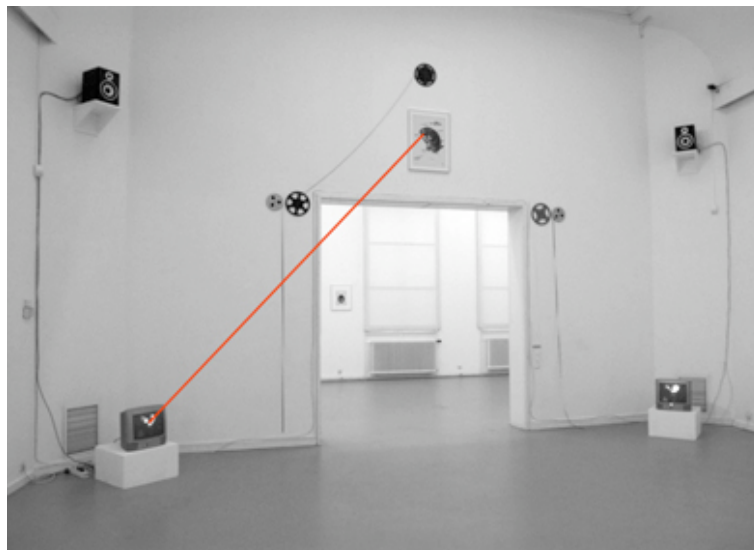


Diagram 5

At the foot of our virtual Ionic pillar – in classical symmetry – are the video loops of Superman engaged in his perpetual struggle with the all-knowing all-seeing Eye-in-the-Sky. It emits laser beams death-rays from out of its pyramid.

⁴ 'Directional perspective' refers to the fact that perspective has to originate in a single point, i.e. the gaze as an object in itself.

Liberté, égalité, sélection.

If the doorway below the beaver forms the entrance of a classical temple, than the temple itself is occupied by Liberté, égalité, sélection. – at once a seemingly hollow exercise in form whilst simultaneously filled with the holy ghost of its own making.



Liberté, égalité, sélection.

It was originally dedicated to the Cult of the Supreme Being – the Cult of the Supreme Being being Robespierre's favoured religion, as it stood in direct competition with the Cult of Reason. The inevitable conclusion was beheading for all the architects of these competing religions – first of the architects of the Cult of Reason (Jacques Hébert and Pierre Gaspard) and eventually Robespierre himself was lead to the guillotine during the period where in which he was attempting to place himself at the centre of the Cult of the Supreme Being.

But as the title suggests, the conclusion is tied into a more problematic set of paradoxes of how things tend to evolve. After Robespierre's death, Fraternité was subtracted from the tripartite motto of *Liberté, égalité, fraternité*. The displacement of Fraternité by Sélection is the dystopian conclusion of eugenicists – the discipline dedicated to finding scientific methods to social exclusion and the negation of political upheavals – one of many 19th century mutations of the Enlightenment.



Liberté, égalité, sélection.

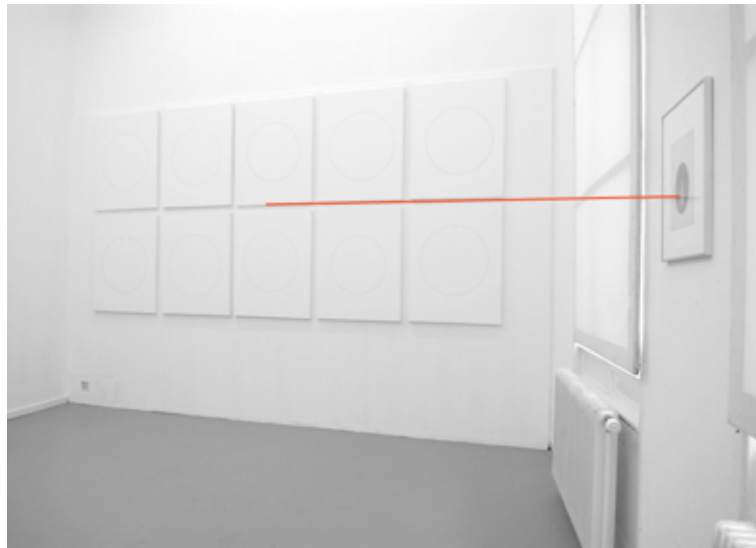


Diagram 6

Eight circles on white canvas are accompanied by a ninth circle of a man in an oval turned upside down. The print produces its own inversion, as well as producing another point from which the perspective of the gaze is bought back to its own content. This time it is an anonymous man by an anonymous artist from the nineteenth century that looks at the canvases.



Civic Virtue

‘Man in oval’ is also visually at the centre of the beaver’s Ionic temple as it is directly below the animal when seen from within the main room – a viewpoint that relies on being at its approximate centre. This point is the one occupied by the marble head of ‘Civic Virtue’.



Diagram 7

Snowman / Fishwife

The third room holds a 3-D video of two public sculptures. It places them in a line of perspective where they occupy the middle of the inner temple. Its 3-dimensionality holds an additional layers of spatial cognition – it confirms that what monumentality realizes is a deliberate occupation of the symbolic plane.



Snowman / Fishwife



Diagram 8

A double burger and two metamorphoses: a proposal for a Dutch Cat, a Dutch Dog, a Dutch Donkey, a Dutch Goat and finally, a Dutch Camel.



A double burger and two metamorphoses

The inner room holds similar themes of perspective in its formal composition – the image casually disfigures itself onto two separate planes. The artist keeps having conversations with herself in the guise of a cat. It is one in a long line of conversation with various domesticated animals. These animals seem to represent the bourgeoisie, but the content of the dialogue however centres very much on the concerns of enlightenment ideology.



A double burger and two metamorphoses

Slithering

The innermost room contains a video which is a variant of the production-based re-make of ‘Apocalypse Now’ (Perfect, genuine, complete, crystalline, pure). Shot within the society’s ground-floors,⁵ it depicts the scene where Willard is given the assignment to assassinate Kurtz.

The question at hand is not so much a matter of style or homage. It is the surprising authenticity of such a mission to reflect contemporary power structures. Like the Baroque of the mainstream, it hides everything within itself by overstating its own form and by holding all the most disturbing truths at its surface – to the extent that the viewer is forced to pretend not to understand it.



Slithering



Slithering

But what is much more interesting is the return to the original conspiracy. Between the corpses of Julius Caesar and Maximilien Robespierre lies the line which divides the Republic from the Empire. The execution of the rebel military leader is bought back into the realm of mundane formalities of assassination from the perspective of the CIA’s bureaucrats.

⁵ Arti et Amicitiae was founded as an artist’s society in 1939 and its activities includes a private club and an exhibition space at in the centre of Amsterdam.

The Conspiracy

Paradoxes retain their ability to hold their own internal contradictions. 'Civic Virtue' (the installation) is inside 'Civic Virtue' (the exhibition) – it is the construction of a 'Droste effect'⁶ on a geometrical plane of meaning. 'Civic Virtue' is the picture within the picture that – given enough resolution – will create a fracture that leads to infinity.

The real conspiracy about objects however is the fact that they are smarter than we are – it is they who have travelled through time for the privilege to look at us.



Civic Virtue

⁶ In addition to the Dutch brand of cacao, it can also be found on package of Royal Baking Powder.